

## BEAR CREEK WATERSHED ANALYSIS

### RECREATION

#### CHARACTERIZATION

Recreation in the analysis area is best characterized by season of use, because each season sees different user groups in the area. Some of the same people may overlap for each season, but as a whole there seems to be different public during the different seasons. Summer use is the time when the greatest amount of public use occurs in the area. It is also a time when the greatest diversity of users occurs. Backcountry dispersed camping is generally located along the main fork of Bear Creek. Most of the camping occurs along the first three miles from the Bear Creek Trailhead. These are also the most frequently used dispersed camping sites. The Bear Creek Trail (Figure 1, Recreation) is a fairly heavily used trail during the summer, particularly the lower three miles where fishing (Figure 2, Recreation) is a very popular recreational activity. Other backcountry dispersed sites can be found along the tributaries of Bear Creek, but are generally more isolated, used less frequently and confined to locations next to water sources, i.e. Warm Springs site (Figure 3, Recreation). Motorized dispersed camping occurs along the Palisades Reservoir at a location known as Tissue Point at the upper end of the Bear Creek Arm of the reservoir. Motorized camping use is reservoir and boating related and occurs during the warmer part of the summer. For the most part of the analysis area dispersed camping use and distribution is much higher in the fall season during the big game hunting seasons. The analysis area contains some recreational development centered on the reservoir. Calamity Campground is located close to the Palisades Dam and US Highway 26. The campground has an estimated theoretic capacity use of 30% during the summer and is closed during the winter. Other developed sites include the Bear Creek Trailhead, Calamity Administrative site, Snake River Boat Club (on the Palisades reservoir shore line), and Palisades and Calamity Summer Home Areas along FS Road #058. Developed sites within the analysis area are all located near the Palisades Reservoir and/or along the Bear Creek/Jensen Creek Road #058. The remaining part of the area is not roaded and much less accessible to the majority of the user public. The upper part of Bear Creek is bordered by FS Road #077 and provides additional public access for the analysis area. Public trail use is very popular for most types of recreational uses. Most trails are open under the Targhee Travel Plan to motorized access (50" or less), however trail characteristic do not support or limit ATV use and better suited to 2-wheel motorcycle riders. Public use numbers would seem to be evenly balanced between non-motorized use and motorized use. Very few trails in the analysis area have been designed and constructed. Most have evolved from game trails and continual increased public use. The analysis area is considered an important part of the district motorized access recreational areas, but is not as critical as the area to the north of Bear Creek. Non-motorized trail use is probably as, or more, important to this area as motorized use. Hiking is popular for the lower part of Bear Creek Trail, but can be found throughout the area at times during the summer. Horse riding is wide spread through the area and is an important part of the recreational program of the area. Summer time use for trail riding seems to be increasing although no traffic counts have been made to verify the assumption. Fall use is holding steady or slightly declining as it relates to the hunting season. This would seem directly related to hunting use figures for the area. Vehicle sight-seeing is

generally limited to Bear/Jensen Creek or the Skyline Ridge roads since they are about the only roads in the area. Fall hunting season is a big part of the recreational activity of the area. Total use has declined in the past few years when the hunting regulations placed restrictions on the areas where an individual could hunt. While use is still very evident during the hunting season, use has declined considerably since the hunting regulation changed in the early 90's. Dispersed camping is more wide spread during hunting seasons and trail use is more non-motorized related. Illegal motorized cross-country travel does not seem to be a large problem in the analysis area. This is mostly due to the terrain limitations of the area. There are violations occurring in some areas, but compared to the area to the north and the Big Hole Mountain Range, they are not as problematic. Winter use for most of the area is small due to the terrain limitations. Some snowmachine users with higher skill levels may use the area, but on a small or limited frequency. The area is open to snowmachine use under the current travel plan. Spring recreation is almost non-existent in the area and has the smallest public use of any seasonal period. Between the beginning of snow melt and late May very little public use occurs in the entire analysis area.

The analysis area contains more tree cover than the adjacent watersheds to the north. Land ownership is solid National Forest as well as adjacent land sections.

Recreational outfitting is authorized in the analysis area and in most parts of the Caribou subsection. Hunting and summer type recreational outfitting is authorized throughout the analysis area. No winter outfitting or motorized have been issued or authorized.

Because of the limited road access firewood gathering does not occur except along the Bear/Jensen Road or Skyline Ridge Road.



Figure 1  
Bear Creek Trail



Figure 2  
Bear Creek Stream

## ISSUES AND KEY QUESTIONS

There is a diversity of recreational use of the analysis area. This includes motorized vehicle use, fishing, hunting, and camping. The demand for recreational use of the analysis area has created challenges and opportunities for resource managers.

1. What has been the effect on the motorized public from the past closures placed on this group of publics? Has this had the affect of concentrating use on certain roads/trails/or dispersed areas? Has the support of this group to the Forest Service been lost?
2. How has the past management, i.e. activities, affect trails or the transportation system? Has dead and dying trees blocked trails and caused increased maintenance problems?
3. How have the different activities affected user satisfaction (user conflict)?
4. How can we better identify areas where ATV use can be allowed and improved?
5. How can we control illegal motorized use on the analysis area?
6. Are there opportunities to improve recreation in the analysis area?
7. Does the area infrastructure meet demands of the public?
8. How should the trail difficulty level be maintained or improved in the area (primitive verses developed).
9. What level of trailhead development is needed to meet public use and demands?
10. What level of development is appropriate for dispersed camping around the reservoir?
11. With increased population and use, will increased use have a negative impact on natural resources of the area?

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

**Dispersed Camping** – Generally backcountry dispersed camping sites are in fair to good condition, meaning the vegetation in the campsite is present and very little evidence of bare soil can be found. Sites can be identified by the presence of rock fire rings and tent poles tied to the trees (Figure 5, Recreation). Backcountry dispersed camping use is low and is pretty much limited to selective sites along Bear Creek. Most dispersed camping occurs during the fall hunting season and in a few sites along the lower part of Bear Creek and few tributaries. Summer camping in these sites does seem to be increasing and all sites will likely see an increase in use in the future. Increases in summer use will likely impact sites more than they are presently experiencing. The dispersed site at Warm Springs is used more during the summer months and does show signs of bare soil, particularly around trees where horses are tied up. This is the only site in the analysis area where site impacts seem moderate to heavy. Dispersed camping along the reservoir is much more frequent and bare soil can be seen in several locations. This use occurs throughout the summer when water levels in the reservoir are higher and drops off during the fall season. Reservoir use is motorized related where roads and ATV trails can be seen on and around the site, including below high water mark when the reservoir is low. Some sanitation facilities are provided at these sites because of the use during the summer.

**Trail Condition and Use** – The Bear Creek Trail is considered one of the top three trails on the Palisades Ranger District as far as public use is concerned. It is estimated between 10,000 to 12,000 visitors use the trail annually during the summer, the bulk of the use occurring on the lower three miles of trail. For the most part the trail is considered in good condition. Some locations of the trail are near the stream and are being washed out as the stream continues to meander and make new channels. The trail is narrow and only suitable for hiking, horse travel or motorcycle use. Upstream from the junction of the North Fork Trail, the main Bear Creek Trail crosses Bear Creek at many locations making hiking and biking difficult. There are a total of 63 miles of trails within the analysis area. Most (53 miles) are designated motorized, but are not recommended or suitable for ATVs. Most of the trails are spin offs from early game or cattle trails and as such many trails have steep sections (Figure 4, Recreation) where erosion is occurring. Many of the trails follow drainages and water channels, are in terrain limited locations, and only allow trails passage in the V bottoms of the canyon. Higher skilled motorized users are most likely to use the trail system during the summer and would consider the analysis area a more primitive motorized experience. The Bear Creek Trailhead is located along the Bear/Jensen Road and is the only developed trailhead within the analysis area. The trailhead is in need of rehabilitation. Parking is not adequate for the use the trail is receiving and the facilities are in need of replacement.

**Roads** – Most of the analysis area is within inventoried roadless areas and has very few roads to permit public access. The Bear Jensen Road is the main road on the Palisades Reservoir side of the analysis area and traverses through part of the study area. On the west side of the study area is a small section of the Brockman Road (becomes boundary of the analysis area). Both roads provide forest visitor access and site seeing opportunity. The Big Elk Mountain oil well road is also within the area and usable by high clearance vehicles. This road is used very infrequently and probably served motorcycle and ATV use more than full sized vehicles. There are 18.5 miles of roads within the study area. Half of these miles are the Bear /Jensen Creek Road.

Commercial Outfitting - Commercial outfitters use the analysis area for both summer time recreational riding and fall hunting. Two commercial outfitters use the area for big game hunting while three commercial outfitters provide summer time riding opportunities. Summer time use is day use only meaning no camping is done, while both hunting outfitters have reserved campsites for their operations. Last year 346 service days were reported for commercial hunting and 38 service days for summer time recreational use. Use levels seem to be leveled off or declining slightly for hunting outfitting, while recreational outfitting is increasing and will likely continue to increase in the next few years. Additional service days for hunting are controlled by the market and are unlikely to be needed in the future. Recreational outfitting increase has been planned for and additional days are within the plan for the district. The outfitter permits do not specifically identify fishing as a main activity, but most outfitters do some amount of fishing with hunting or recreational riding. This has been a sensitive issue for the Fish and Game for this area, particularly Bear Creek.

Hiking – Hiking in the Bear Creek drainage is an frequent activity for the analysis area. Most hiking occurs in the lower parts of Bear Creek and is much lower in the upper reaches of the drainage. Hiking is generally fishing related. It is unlikely this situation will change.

Horse Use – Horse use is scattered throughout the analysis area and is a frequent summer event. Many people use the area for day rides and some overnight camping. This area will continue to be an important horse use area.

Winter Use – Most of the analysis area is not used during the winter. The Poker Peak area is an exception. During the past few years more and more people have discovered the Poker Peak area for its snowmachine wonder. Use has increase each year. There is only a small portion of the Poker Peak area in the analysis area and that portion is the least used portion of the Poker Peak snowmachine area. However it does receive winter use from snowmachines. The Bear Creek/Jensen Road is classified in the Forest Travel Plan as a winter designated route through a small winter range within the analysis area. The remaining part of the analysis area has little use from snowmachines. Cross-country skiing is not a factor in the analysis area except maybe the first 3 or 4 miles along the Bear /Jensen Creek Road coming in from the dam side.

Hunting – Big game hunting, particularly elk hunting, is an important part of the fall recreation use of the district. In the 70 and 80s hunters were not ask to be selective on where they wanted to hunt; hence, they moved from one open hunt to another. In the 90s Fish and Game regulations changed and hunters had to declare where they were going to hunt and they could not move from one area to another. This change alone decreased the overall use of the area significantly. Use is still high but much lower than the mid-80s when use was very high. Annually motorized use decreases during the hunting season and is not a factor after the weather changes in the fall.

Developed Sites – Other than recreational special uses, the only developed recreation facility is the Calamity Campground. This campground was redeveloped in the 90s and is currently in good condition. The campground has approximately 30 to 40% theoretic capacity use.

Recreational Special Uses – Within the analysis area are two summer home recreational special use tracts. The Calamity and Palisades Summer Home Tracts have 25 and 18 homes respectively. Both areas are located along the Bear/Jensen Road and near the Palisades Dam. The Palisades Summer Home Area is experiencing a sharp increase in dead and dying trees in and around the tract. This has lead to increased concern by the district for fuel build up and wildfire occurrence and damage. Forest use within the analysis area from the summer homes is mostly related to the reservoir. Other special use permit holders include the Snake River Boat Club along the Bear Creek arm of the Palisades Reservoir.

Other Developments – The Calamity Administrative Site is located between the Calamity Campground and the Palisades Reservoir. The development includes a three-bedroom house and a two-door garage.



Figure 3  
Warm Springs Pool



Figure 4  
Warm Springs Trail #148

## PAST CONDITIONS

There are no data or surveys to show past or current use that is occurring in the analysis area. Conclusions relating to recreational use are based on field observation of Palisades District personnel and long time users of the area.

### Dispersed Camping

Dispersed camping has long been a part of the landscape particularly around the major water sources. This is true along Bear Creek, and since the construction of the Palisades Dam, along the upper end of the Bear Creek arm of the reservoir. Because of surrounding increased population growth and improved travel methods, dispersed camping has increased, but site locations appear to remain fairly consistent. Early dispersed camping (15 to 20 years ago) was centered on fall big game hunting. Hunting was the primary recreation use of the area. Horses were used to gain access to the backcountry and are still used throughout the analysis area. In the mid-1980s the hunting public use was at an all-time high during the five-day elk hunt. Campsites were numerous and day use was high. This continued until the early 90s when the Fish and Game regulations were changed to restrict hunters from traveling from one open hunt to another within the state. The dispersed camping shift from hunting use to summer use began in the early 90s and seems to be gaining momentum. Motorized use was uncommon for most of the area until the 80s with access related to horse travel for access to backcountry sites. Motorized use began to grow in the 80s and has been increasing ever since as being a key method of accessing to the camping sites in the backcountry. Along roads motor homes and RV camping has replaced tent camping in dispersed sites.

### Motorized Travel

Motorized use has been in the area for many years, but the amount of use that exists did not exist 10 years ago. Equipment technology and population growth have both added to the amount of use occurring today as compared with the past, even 10 years ago. Motorized travel in the past was confined to the better-maintained trails and/or areas where access was easily achieved. Travel restrictions were not in place at that time leaving the entire area open for motorized travel; however, motorized use was not that popular and motorized vehicle (motorcycles and ATVs) availability for the general public was low. As a result, natural resource problems related to motorized use was also small. Snowmachines use may have been present in the study area, but would have been minimal. Low use of snowmachines in the analysis area seems to be fairly true today. Even with the increased technology since the mid-80s, snowmachine use in this area is still considered low compared to adjacent areas. ATV use in the past has been very low to non-existent. ATV sales have been a fairly recent event (mid-80s) and early ATV technology was not advanced enough for backcountry travel. For most of the analysis area, terrain is the limiting factor for off road travel. However, the number of machines sold in eastern Idaho is climbing rapidly and will likely have a bigger influence on the study area in the future.

### Developed Facilities

Development of the study area was light in the past and still only represents a small portion of the area. Calamity Campground was built at the time of the construction of the Palisades Dam and still represents the only developed campground in the study area. Bear Creek Trailhead was developed many years ago; the exact time is not known, but guessed to be in the late 50s or early 60s. It is still the only developed trailhead in the study area. Other developments had not occurred prior to the dam. Development around the reservoir occurred immediately after the dam construction, and includes, Calamity Campground, Calamity Guard Station, two summer home tracts, a boat club (organizational camp special use) and a public boat ramp. Since that time little development has occurred.

### Outfitting

No summer outfitting (other than incidental use with big game hunting permits) was permitted in this area prior to the mid-90s. Big game hunting outfitting has been done throughout the area for many years. Various types of outfitting have recently been allowed on the reservoir, but little use prior to the mid-90s.

## TRENDS

### Dispersed Camping

Backcountry dispersed camping appears to be shifting from a dominate fall/hunter use to a more summer recreational use. Total recreational use (dispersed camping) is increasing in the backcountry, but not at unexpected or accelerated rates. Use appears to be following normal increased use of the National Forest. This type of growth and shift in time of use is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Use along the first 3 to 4 miles of Bear Creek will continue to grow faster than the remaining part of the backcountry. Fishing and camping will be a large part of the growth.

RV dispersed camping around the reservoir and along the main roads will likely grow at about the same rate. The public will likely not develop new camping sites but will use the sites already identified more frequently during the summer. Future camping will be centered more on motorized use in these areas, particularly ATV and OHV camping. Boating will continue to be the main emphasis for the Tissue Point area.

### Motorized Travel

Motorized use in the analysis area will likely increase. However it is not expected to grow in use as other areas such as the Fall Creek drainage. This is due to the limitation placed on the user by the terrain and vegetation of the area. Illegal trails and cross-country travel should not be a major issue in this study area in the next few years. Two-wheel motorcycle use will continue but will not see a large increase in use as other adjacent areas may experience. Horse ownership (traditional means of access) is limited by space and dollars for many of the general public, so the traditional methods of accessing the backcountry has and will remain much as it is presently.

### Developed Facilities

There are no planned developed facilities in the analysis area. This is expected to remain unchanged for many years with no future developments in the planning process. Vegetation changes, particularly insect activities, may well play an important part in the summer home use of the area. As fuel build up occurs the potential for a large wildfire will grow. This may place the future of the summer homes at risk or removal.

### Outfitting

Commercial outfitting is not expected to change much in the coming years for hunting opportunities. However, summer recreational outfitting demands are expected to continue to grow. This area is very well suited for summer recreational daytime activities and is close to private lodging opportunities. The area is currently unroaded for the most part and offers a good recreational trip for the public.

### Winter Use

Winter use has been fairly light for most of the analysis area. This is due to limitations of terrain and vegetation and the fact that the area does not lead to a destination spot such as the Palisades Backcountry. Winter use in the backcountry particularly by snowmachine is not expected to increase significantly. It is low now and it is expected to remain low compared to surrounding areas. Snowmachine use may increase in the Poker Peak area and to the summer homes in the future. In all, the analysis area shows little change in winter use in the future.



Figure 5  
Dispersed Campsite  
Near Warm Springs



Figure 6  
Bear Creek Trailhead

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Restoration/Protection

#### Trailheads

1. Redevelop Bear Creek Trailhead (Figure 6, Recreation) by: a) increasing parking space on the north side of the existing parking lot (against the mountain), b) replace existing trailhead facilities, c) completing the information board, and d) replacing the existing toilet with a CTX vault toilet.
2. Develop all trailheads within the analysis area. These are low priority project needs, but would serve to show the end of roads and beginning of trails. Development to include: a) suitable parking, b) information board and signing, and c) appropriate barrier placement. They are:
  - a. Big Elk Mountain (Trail 130)
  - b. Commissary Ridge (Trail 029)
  - c. Poker Peak (Trails 156, 158, 159)
  - d. Upper Bear Creek (Trails 084 and 140)

#### Trails

1. Trails (except Bear Creek, 047) within the analysis should remain primitive motorized in nature. Trails include 029, 042, 043, 044, 048, 049, 130, 140, 144, 146, 147, 148, 156, 157, and 159. Note the trail on the north edge of the analysis area (034) will be managed with the Fall Creek Drainage analysis area and is not part of this recommendation. Primitive motorized refers to trail tread width remaining similar to what exists now and not widened to facilitate wider vehicles (ATVs). Trail relocation should be considered for reducing soil erosion, but will normally require only changing short sections of the trail verse relocating entire trail length.
2. Bear Creek Trail (047) should be maintained to a high standard from the trailhead to the North Fork Trail junction. Trail tread should be reconstructed to a minimum width of 24 inches. Drainage and trail grade should be considered high priority in design planning. Information signing should be improved to inform users of the area and its resources protection measures.
3. Recommend changing travel plan to separate use between ATV and motorcycles trails. Develop a network of trails for ATV (Fall Creek) and limit them on more primitive narrow trails (Bear Creek). Revise Forest Travel Plan to restrict motorcycle use of 250cc engines and greater. Most damage to the trails and hill climbs are a result of larger machines with greater horsepower. ATV and motorcycle travel on the National Forest should be for trail riding and not motor cross experience

#### Dispersed Camping

1. Dispersed camping sites in the backcountry should remain rather primitive with no improvements, except the Warm Springs site. At the Warm Spring site, hitching rails and fire circles should be provided for user control. Site monitoring should be done on the

sites along Bear Creek between the trailhead and the North Fork junction once every three years to determine if site rehab work is necessary.

2. Dispersed camping at the Tissue Point sites should be planned, designed and hardened. Vehicle access roads should be limited to those needed and graveled. Sanitation facilities should be provided. A second CTX toilet should be planned for this site. Information signing should be placed along the road for recreation user education. Sites along the Bear/Jensen Road should be clearly marked and limited in size by number of firings to one per site.

3. ATV use related to dispersed camping will likely continue and increase over time. Much of this will occur around the Tissue Point area. Recognize resource values below high water mark of the reservoir, but also understand that a trade-off of having ATV use on the reservoir is better than some place else in the analysis area. We, therefore, recommend that ATVs be allowed to use the reservoir below high water mark without restrictions.

#### Development

1. No new development is recommended at this time in the analysis area (except Tissue Point and trailheads mentioned above).
2. Recommend that vegetation management planning within 1 mile of the Palisades and Calamity Summer Home Areas are completed and action is taken immediately to reduce fuel build up within this analysis area.
3. Summer home association and/or members should be given opportunity to review home site with fire management specialist and permit administrator concerning fire precaution management around their home site.
4. Fuel build up between the Calamity Campground and the summer home area should be removed as soon as possible to reduce risk of fire spread from campground to home area.

#### Winter Use

1. Wintertime use should remain open, but remain low key for most of the analysis area. Poker Peak portion will be managed according to direction given to the remaining part of Poker Peak area (area to the south).
2. Groomed snowmachine routes should remain and be signed appropriately.
3. Dog sledding on groomed snowmachine routes should be avoided.
4. If the Snake River Road is snow plowed in the future and it is no longer used as a groomed snowmachine trail, we recommend that a winter parking facility be constructed some place in the gravel flat area to accommodate winter use.

#### Outfitting

1. Recommend that no additional hunting outfitting be allowed in the analysis area, with exception to special hunts such as cougar hunting.
2. Summer recreational outfitting is allowed based on the current outfitting capacity policy used by the district.

3. No reserved campsites will be allowed in the Warm Springs area, along the main fork of Bear Creek. All other sites may be considered under separate environmental study.
4. No motorized winter outfitting should be permitted within the analysis area, except Poker Peak portion and Skyline Ridge Road portion of the analysis area, which may be considered.
5. Recommend that outfitter parking be provided some place other than the main Bear Creek Trailhead. The size of the trailhead is not adequate to handle both uses, even if redeveloped, during heavy use seasons.
6. Outfitter fishing should be restricted on the main fork of Bear Creek between the trailhead and the junction of the North Fork Trail. This is in response to the already heavy public use of this stretch of stream.